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Nutrition Education In Elementary School Programs

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The participants of the 1967 Nutrition Education Conference recommended that particular effort be made to develop guidelines for ongoing nutrition education in schools. Perusal of the literature and observations in schools reveal that nutrition information has been included in school programs for many years. Surveys show, however, that poor eating habits among children persist.

Much has been learned about educational approaches to promote (1) wholesome attitudes toward food and (2) desirable eating habits. Some guidelines have been developed for sequential nutrition programs, but few such programs are actually in progress.

The mounting concern of the nation's leaders for the nutritional health of the people, particularly children, is causing school administrators to consider what the contribution of the school might be to improved food practices among people. It is important that nutritionists and workers in allied professions be ready with sound information and approaches for such programs when they are consulted by school personnel.

In this issue of Nutrition Program News, we present some information about sequential programs that have been established over the years by nutrition education research.

PEOPLE INVOLVED

As in other areas of learning, a school nutrition committee is needed for curriculum planning and implementation. It should be composed of representatives of all groups involved in conducting the nutrition program—the school administrator, a nutrition consultant, and representatives of teachers, school lunch personnel, medical staff, and parents. Their function would be to plan, coordinate, implement, and evaluate the teaching of nutrition in the elementary school.

School administrator

The school administrator is the key to ongoing programs. Without him, programs are generally limited to isolated activities initiated by the teacher beyond the requirements of the curriculum. The administrator allocates the necessary funds, approves occasional changes in schedule to permit special activities, and keeps the board of education and the community informed of the objectives, procedures, and progress of the program.

Nutrition consultant

A nutrition consultant is needed to provide sound up-to-date nutrition information appropriate to the age and maturity of the children. This consultant can be the home economics teacher if she has specialized in nutrition and foods. Otherwise, this service can usually be obtained from the nutrition instructor of a local college or university, the Extension nutrition specialist, the public health nutritionist, or the nutritionist in one of the voluntary community agencies.

Teachers

Teachers are experts at working with children. They influence the attitudes and habits of their pupils in many areas of living. With a little guidance in selecting nutrition information, teachers can make a significant contribution to the development of attitudes, habits, and understandings that will lead to desirable food practices.

School lunch personnel

Schools that have a school lunch program have an excellent resource for teaching nutrition and developing good eating habits. School lunch personnel can cooperate with

the teaching staff in providing experiences that will enhance the classroom program. Also, personnel can observe the children in the lunch room and report on the progress being made.

Medical staff

Nutrition is a part of a broad health program. The school medical staff should serve in an advisory capacity to any classroom health program. The health records of children provide some bench marks for the evaluation of programs. The school nurse is most likely to be the representative of the medical staff on a curriculum committee.

Parents

Ideas promoted in school have a much better chance of being accepted and used by children if their parents understand and cooperate by making available at home foods that are being studied in school. Parents can also contribute to the program by helping with occasional special activities. A parent who is a member of the Parent-Teachers Association makes a good representative on a school committee because he or she can reach other parents through the organization.

DEVELOPING ATTITUDES, HABITS, UNDERSTANDINGS

Work in the elementary school can contribute to the development of (1) wholesome attitudes toward food, (2) desirable eating habits, and (3) understandings that will help children choose to carry their good eating habits into adulthood.

Attitudes

Children's beliefs about food and their attitudes toward food can be influenced early in the school career by the climate of the classroom and the example of the teachers.

Many schools provide experiences for first, second, or third grade children to help them know and understand the community.

Teachers have modified negative attitudes of children toward particular foods by creating a spirit of adventure in the classroom, by planning trips to food markets, and by providing opportunities for the children to taste unfamiliar or previously rejected foods.

Games, stories, school lunch experiences, and trips into the community promote nutrition learning while at the same time achieving objectives in other areas of learning, such as in the language arts, social studies, and science.

Often children will taste foods when their classmates taste them, but would reject the same foods at home. There is nothing wrong with the food at home. It is simply that

children desire to conform to the peer group or to copy what a particular friend is doing.

Experiences that give children the opportunity to investigate different textures, consistencies, and flavors help them identify and enjoy a great variety of foods. This makes it easy to serve children an adequate diet without meals becoming repetitious and dull.

Habits

Habits are the result of repeated experience. Good habits are the result of repeated experience with desirable practices. The school can and often does contribute to the development of good eating habits by providing experiences both in the classroom and in the school lunch.

The school lunch presents a balanced diet day after day with various combinations of food. Thus, we can have in the school curriculum the opportunity for repeated experience with desirable practices.

Classroom experiences are also necessary because we know that simply making food available is no assurance that it will be eaten. Children must be motivated to taste foods that appear new to them or are prepared a little differently than in the way to which they are accustomed.

Teachers can help motivate children to eat the food served in the lunch. They can do this most effectively by the example they set. If the teacher rejects the food, the children are likely to reject it also.

Primary grade teachers, particularly, can help by discussing the menu in class and relating it to foods the children have been learning about. If she does this in a positive fashion, she helps create a feeling of acceptance in the children before they reach the lunchroom.

Understandings

Basic concepts of nutrition for teaching food selection to people of all ages were developed by the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education and were first published in Nutrition Program News (September-October 1964). For your convenience we repeat them:

1. Nutrition is the food you eat and how the body uses it.

We eat food to live, to grow, to keep healthy and well, and to get energy for work and play.

2. Food is made up of different nutrients needed for growth and health.

- All nutrients needed by the body are available through food.
- Many kinds and combinations of foods can lead to a well-balanced diet.
- No food, by itself, has all the nutrients needed for full growth and health.
- Each nutrient has specific uses in the body.

- Most nutrients do their best work in the body when teamed with other nutrients.

3. All persons, throughout life, have need for the same nutrients, but in varying amounts.

- The amounts of nutrients needed are influenced by age, sex, size, activity, and state of health.
- Suggestions for the kinds and amounts of food needed are made by trained scientists.

4. The way food is handled influences the amounts of nutrients in food, its safety, appearance, and taste.

Handling means everything that happens to food while it is being grown, processed, stored, and prepared for eating.

Children in elementary school can gain understandings that contribute to the development of the above concepts. Some of these are:

1. Eating good food adds to the joy of living—it's fun.
2. We need to know and eat a wide variety of foods so that we get all the nutrients and energy we need to live, to grow, to work, and to play.
3. Food makes a difference in how we look, how we feel, and how children grow.
4. The food we eat is an important part of health throughout life.
5. In the school lunch, we learn to eat and enjoy everyday the foods we learn to know at home and in the classroom.
6. Everyone needs a meal in the morning to make a good start for the day.
7. Everyday we need:
 - milk or milk products
 - fruits and vegetables
 - breads and cereals
 - meat or alternate.

SEQUENTIAL PROGRAMS

If desirable attitudes, habits, and understandings are to result, sequential programs are necessary. The primary grades can be devoted to developing wholesome attitudes towards food, increasing the variety of foods that children will eat, establishing good food practices, and promoting understanding of the basic nutrition concepts listed earlier—particularly the first two.

Each of these objectives is achieved gradually by different experiences provided over time on a regularly planned basis. Crash programs simply do not work. Furthermore, nutrition should not be taken out of context but should be a part of a good broad health program integrated into the many areas of learning already in the curriculum.

As children grow and mature, they are ready and eager to have questions answered. Grades four through six can be devoted to teaching that food makes a difference in how one looks and feels and in how well children grow. Experiences can be provided that (1) will increase the depth of understanding of the concepts described earlier and (2) will help children begin to conclude for themselves that this is a good way to eat.

In junior and senior high schools, children study some of the sciences that undergird the science of nutrition. This provides opportunities for learning in some depth the relationships of nutrition to health, well-being, and productivity. By the time the secondary school career is completed, students should know a wide variety of the nation's abundant food supply and be able to select food combinations that lead to a good diet. Further, they should be so convinced that eating this way is enjoyable, that they will carry their good eating habits into adulthood.

COORDINATION

Coordination is essential—both within the school and in the community—if a sequential program is to result from the activities of many groups. All who are involved in nutrition activities should be informed of the total picture—each should know what the others are doing. The responsibility for coordination in the school can most logically be accomplished by the school nutrition committee.

School programs can be enhanced by the cooperation of community groups who have a nutrition component in their programs. In many communities there is a local nutrition committee made up of representatives of these groups.

After the plans for the school year are blocked out and evaluated for potential contribution to over-all objectives, a meeting with the local nutrition committee for exchange of information can be most helpful. If both school and community groups are working to develop the same "big ideas," one program reinforces the other. It is helpful if parents visiting a local clinic learn the same things that the school is teaching their children.

EVALUATION

Mary Swartz Rose, pioneer in nutrition education, once said that to properly evaluate nutrition education of children, one would have to wait until the children were adults and had children of their own. She added, however, that there were many signposts of progress.

Children must be studied at the beginning of the program to establish benchmarks for later study. It is necessary to record information on their food habits, general health status, and current attitudes toward food.

Schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program have an excellent resource for gathering this data. Attitudes and food habits are revealed in the lunch experience every day. Numerous observations can be made and recorded that will, over time, show whether there has been progress. Most schools report that an outcome of a classroom program is greater school lunch participation and less food waste in the lunch.

Food consumption surveys can be made from time to time by the nutrition consultant in cooperation with teachers and parents. The surveys provide information on (1) total eating patterns of children, (2) availability of foods at home, and (3) amount of carryover of classroom teachings into the home.

The medical staff keeps records of the general health status of children. These records can provide information on growth, development, and illness. Most schools that have conducted nutrition programs report fewer one-day and half-day absences due to minor illnesses. This is reflected in the academic achievement of children. It stands to reason that children who get to school regularly will achieve more.

IN CONCLUSION

The foregoing pulls together ideas for overall structure and planning in elementary school programs. Over the past ten years, Nutrition Program News has published many articles on school nutrition programs, such as:

Present Day Concepts of Learning—Their Use in Nutrition Education, Willa Vaughn Tinsley.

Nutrition Activities in Elementary Schools, Mary M. Hill.

Increasing Acceptability of the School Lunch, Mary M. Hill.

Nutrition Education Demonstrations, Clara Mae Taylor.

"Do-It-Yourself" Posters Teach Nutrition, Mary M. Hill.

Team Approach to Nutrition Education in Schools, Mary M. Hill.

Planning Nutrition Programs for Elementary School Teachers, Mary M. Hill.

The Food Guide—A Tool for Teaching Nutrition, Louise Page and Mary M. Hill.

Basic Nutrition Concepts—Their Use in Program Planning and Evaluation, Mary M. Hill.

Nutrition and the Type A School Lunch, Mary M. Hill.

Two books have been published in the last six years that should be helpful in planning school programs, including in-service nutrition training for teachers:

Nutrition in Action. Second Edition, 1965. Ethel Austin Martin. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Nutrition Education in Action. 1963. Ethel Austin Martin. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Groups of nutritionists and educators in several States—including Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Georgia, and Indiana—have developed guidelines and suggestions for nutrition education activities in elementary schools. These materials are geared to the particular needs of the children in those States.

Much resource material is available from such industry-sponsored groups as National Dairy Council, Cereal Institute, National Livestock and Meat Board, and Sunkist Growers.

State nutrition committees could provide a real service by periodically evaluating for soundness of interpretation the many nutrition materials that schools receive.